



Environmental Justice Questions - Fact Sheet

What is Environmental Justice?

The goal of environmental justice is to ensure that all people, regardless of race, national origin or income, are protected from disproportionate impacts of environmental hazards. To be classified as an environmental justice community, residents must be a minority and/or low income group; excluded from the environmental policy setting and/or decision-making process; subject to a disproportionate impact from one or more environmental hazards; and experience a disparate implementation of environmental regulations, requirements, practices and activities in their communities. Environmental justice is about real people facing real problems and designing practical solutions to address challenging environmental issues. The environmental justice movement advocates programs that promote environmental protection within the context of sustainable development. Utilizing various methods, including traditional knowledge about the eco-system and community mobilization, the environmental justice community has become a formidable force in protection of both the urban and rural environments.

How did the environmental justice movement arise?

The environmental justice movement was started by people, primarily people of color, who needed to address the inequity of environmental protection services in their communities. Grounded in the struggles of the 1960's civil rights movement, these citizens from every facet of life, emerged to elucidate the environmental inequities facing millions of people. These communities rose to articulate and to sound the alarm about the public health dangers which posed an immediate danger to the

lives of their families, their communities and themselves.

What information did EPA rely upon to determine that environmental injustice exists?

In response to a variety of concerns raised by EPA staff and the public (the Michigan Coalition, Congressional Black Caucus, and others), the EPA Administrator William Reilly formed the EPA Environmental Equity Workgroup in 1990 with staff from all EPA offices and regions across the Agency. The Workgroup was directed to assess the evidence that racial minority and low-income communities bear higher environmental risk burden than the general population, and consider what EPA might do about any identified disparities. The report entitled *Environmental Equity: Reducing Risk in All Communities* reviewed data that existed on the distribution of environmental exposures and risks across population groups and summarized a review of EPA programs with respect to racial minority and low-income populations. The Workgroup reported several major findings indicating the existence of environmental injustice and made a number of recommendations to the Agency including the prioritization of environmental equity.

Why did EPA undertake environmental justice as a guiding principle?

Because of the Agency's strong belief that all Americans regardless of race, color, national origin, or economic circumstance are important to the future of our nation and should be able to live in a clean, healthy environment, EPA Administrator Browner made

environmental justice one of EPA's highest priorities and established environmental justice as one of the seven guiding principles in the Agency's strategic plan in 1993. In an Agency-wide meeting, she stated that "many people of color, low-income and Native American communities have raised concerns that they suffer a disproportionate burden of health consequences due to the siting of industrial plants and waste dumps, and from exposure to pesticides or other toxic chemicals at home and on the job ... EPA is committed to addressing these concerns and is assuming a leadership role in environmental justice to enhance environmental quality for all residents of the United States."

What is Executive Order 12898 "Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations"?

The Executive Order was signed by President Bill Clinton on February 11, 1994, to focus federal attention on the environmental and human health conditions of minority and low-income populations with the goal of achieving environmental protection for all communities. The Order directed federal agencies to develop environmental justice strategies to aid federal agencies identify and address disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of their programs, policies, and activities on minority and low-income populations. The Order is also intended to promote nondiscrimination in federal programs substantially affecting human health and the environment, and to provide minority and low-income communities access to public information on, and an opportunity for public participation in, matters relating to human health or the environment. The Presidential Memorandum accompanying the Order underscores certain provisions of existing law that can help ensure that all communities and persons across this nation live in a safe and healthful environment.

What is the Interagency Working Group?

One of the provisions of the Executive Order established an Interagency Working Group (IWG) on environmental justice chaired by the EPA Administrator and comprised of the heads of eleven

departments/agencies and several White House offices. These include the EPA, the Departments of Justice, Defense, Energy, Labor, Interior, Transportation, Agriculture, Housing and Urban Development, Commerce, and Health and Human Services, the Council on Environmental Quality, the Office of Management and Budget, the Office of Science and Technology Policy, the Domestic Policy Council, and the Council of Economic Advisors. The IWG established eight task forces to concentrate on areas that required the most coordination. These include: 1) Research and Health; 2) Outreach; 3) Data; 4) Enforcement and Compliance; 5) Implementation; 6) Native American; 7) Guidance; and 8) Interagency projects. Each task force is chaired by two agencies with representation from each of the participating agencies.

Why was the Office of Environmental Justice established?

EPA created the Office of Environmental Justice in 1992 in response to public concern and at the recommendation of the Environmental Equity Workgroup. The Office oversees the integration of environmental justice into EPA's policies, programs, and activities throughout the Agency; serves as the point of contact for environmental justice outreach and educational activities; provides technical and financial assistance. The Office also serves as the lead on the Interagency Working Group of other federal agencies to incorporate environmental justice into all federal programs.

What strategy has EPA formulated to address environmental justice issues?

EPA began developing a strategy to address environmental justice concerns prior to the signing of the Executive Order. The final document, *Environmental Justice Strategy: Executive Order 12898*, is consistent with the Executive Order and ensures the integration of environmental justice into the Agency's programs, policies, and activities. The strategy contains five major areas with include: 1) Public Participation and Accountability, Partnerships, Outreach, and Communication with Stakeholders; 2) Health and

Environmental Research; 3) Data Collection, Analysis, and Stakeholder Access to Public Information; 4) American Indian and Indigenous Environmental Protection; and 5) Enforcement, Compliance Assurance, and Regulatory Reviews.

How are environmental justice strategies being implemented at EPA?

Implementing environmental justice programs at EPA has required modifying the Agency's approach to include educating its officials to recognize that certain populations who are disproportionately impacted by environmental pollution are excluded from the decision and policy making process. EPA's implementation of environmental justice programs includes securing the commitment of senior management; environmental justice guidance for all staff; environmental justice training within the Agency; a cross-media team approach; coordination with states, Indian tribes, industry, and all stakeholders; devotion of resources to program implementation, systematic review and integration of environmental justice priorities into activities, establishment of pilot projects; and development of measurement tools for accountability.

What programs exist to educate individuals and communities about environmental justice issues?

The Office of Environmental Justice participates in several outreach programs for the purpose of education. For several years, EPA has sponsored an internship program with the express desire to encourage students to pursue an environmental career. The internships, which are limited to six months of duration, formalize training and provide "hands-on" experience for students. Students must be registered at a university to participate. In addition to the internship program, two grant programs assist communities and tribal governments in addressing local environmental concerns. A Small Grants Program and a Community-University Partnership Grants Program (CUP) have been offered to increase environmental awareness, expand outreach, and provide training and education to resolve environmental problems such as exposure to environmental pollutants. Check with the Office of Environmental Justice relative to the status of availability of funding for these programs. Programs may not be offered every year.

What are the Environmental Justice Steering Committee, the Policy Workgroup, and Environmental Justice Coordinators?

In 1994, the Agency implemented a new organizational infrastructure to integrate environmental justice into EPA's policies, programs, and activities. This new organization created these groups to work in conjunction with the office of Environmental Justice. The Environmental Justice Steering Committee is made up of senior managers representing each of the Headquarters offices and representatives from the regions. It provides leadership and direction on strategic planning to ensure that environmental justice is incorporated into Agency operations. The Policy Workgroup is a group of high level policy staff brought together to ensure that cross-media policy development and coordination are implemented at all levels. The Environmental Justice Coordinators are the front-line staff specifically responsible to ensure policy input, program development, and implementation at regional and headquarters offices.

What is the NEJAC?

To ensure that EPA was obtaining adequate stakeholder advice and making appropriate changes as it implemented a national environmental justice program, the Agency chartered the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) in 1993. The Council which is governed by the Federal Advisory Committee Act provides independent advice to EPA on all matters relating to environmental justice. It consists of 25 members appointed from stakeholder groups including community-based organizations; business and industry; academic and educational institutions; state and local government agencies; tribal government and community groups; non-governmental organizations and environmental groups. The Council has six subcommittees organized around themes to help develop strategic options for EPA. The subcommittees are: 1) Waste and Facility Siting, 2) Enforcement, 3) Health and Research, 4) Air and Water, 5) Indigenous Peoples, and 6) International.